3: Skrine G-3 (1922-1924) 1926 All Sinkiang All

pretty kind of woodpecker I have not seen elsewhere; it is larger than the English bird and has a scarlet crest, black and white bands on its wings and scarlet again under its body and tail.

Keriya, 13th April.

We had a welcome diversion on the long and rather dreary march between Achma and this place yesterday. In the middle of a belt of sandy steppe 20 miles wide we were suddenly accosted by a weeping peasant woman and her son, a sturdy shepherd boy, who informed us that their hut close by had just been robbed. The father, it appeared, had gone to market, and two thieves had seized the opportunity to come and loot the few pots and pans the poor folk possessed. The lad, who seemed plucky and intelligent, had run after the thieves and thought they had dumped the booty somewhere among the reeds and would come back for it. He pointed out the direction in which they had gone. Without a moment's delay I, my three orderlies, the Beg who accompanied us and his servant charged off helter-skelter across the steppe, spreading fan-wise as we went, while D. and Murad Qari remained on the road comforting the lady. It was bad going and the horses floundered about among dunes and patches of long grass, but before we had gone a mile there was a hurroosh on my right and a view-holloa from Hafiz; two running figures could be seen dodging among the dunes, and off we went after them in full cry. My horse went head over heels in a bad bunker, so that I was not in at the death, but when I came up there were two hulking scoundrels in custody of the Beg. After some prevarication they confessed that they had robbed the poor woman, so we tied their hands and dragged them back to the road where they were duly identified by the delighted boy. At first they refused to say where the booty was, but threats of the Amban's wrath soon prevailed upon them to show us where they had hidden it in the long grass. It was pathetic—a couple of battered copper tea-pots and a small basin, all black with the soot of years, and a dilapidated old blue quilted coat with brass buttons, evidently the absent bread-winner's only change of clothes. We visited the poor woman's home near by, a couple of tiny huts more than half underground and roughly roofed with reeds and turf. Here I photographed the scene and the entire caste, together with the properties, and then the woman fetched us a jug of water from a neighbouring spring by way of hospitality. Poor thing, she could do nothing but weep and quaver "Ashkalla! Ashkall-la!" (thank you) and try to embrace D., whom she evidently looked upon as her deliverer and sole refuge among all the rough men who surrounded her. We took the robbers off with us, trotting at the stirrups of Hafiz and the Beg, and made a present of them to the Amban of Keriya. They turned out to be real bad characters who had been convicted of robbery a year previously and had been punished with a thousand stripes and banishment to Cherchen; it had not been known that they had already found their way back from that remote spot. The Amban, I am sorry to say, did not seem quite as grateful as he might have been. Perhaps it was tactless of us to catch his robbers for him—the preservation of a Chinaman's "face" is a difficult and delicate matter, not to be lightly meddled with by the Western barbarian.